



The Birmingham News

Candidates need to heed these rules

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Imagine Birmingham as a straight line, with points on each end.

On one side, we'll call it the left, is Larry Langford, Jefferson County commissioner, ex-Fairfield mayor and would-be mayor of Birmingham. He's a man of vision, in a sense. In the sense that he never met a big idea he didn't like or a bond issue he didn't think could pay for it.

On the other end, we'll call it the right, is Birmingham Mayor Bernard Kincaid. He's a micromanaging hermit who leans to the safe side. When he was a kid, you just know he never swung at a pitch outside his strike zone. So for eight years now he has sold himself less for what he is than for what he's not: Dick Arrington.

Hey, I know Arrington, and Kincaid is certainly not him.

But now that the mayoral election is less than two months away, the points on that line seem to mark the boundaries of Birmingham's choice. On one hand let's do anything. On the other, let's not. In between is a whole cast of well-known if forgettable characters.

Council members Valerie Abbott, Carole Smitherman and William Bell will try to stand out. So will lawyer Patrick Cooper, who has probably worked the hardest to make up for his complete lack of name recognition, and little-known city inspector Barry Taylor, who has not. In the wings is a guy who calls himself the original Mickey Mouse candidate.

Would any of these make a great mayor? Probably not.

Otis White, president of Atlanta's Civic Strategies Inc., has worked to assess the strengths of mayoral candidates across the country, most recently for Atlanta and Memphis. He said you ultimately have to ask the same questions: "What are their general qualifications, and what is their vision?"

What happens when impressive qualifications don't add up to success? Or when vision is overwhelming? You look at the qualities that have worked in other places.

A few years back White interviewed several legendary mayors and wrote a paper describing what worked for them. So all Birmingham candidates, pay attention. The best mayors, White wrote, do these things:

"Borrow from everyone." The best mayors don't necessarily have the best ideas, but they pick them up across the community. In other words, Mr. Kincaid, you don't have to think of everything.

"Start with small conversations but expand quickly." The best plans emerge from small gatherings in which thinkers and leaders trade ideas. Wow. For that to happen, Birmingham's mayor would have to meet with thinkers. An unfamiliar concept.

"Build from existing strengths." Successful visions come from existing community assets. A dome, for instance, might sell if there were a real hope for a team.

"Don't go public with visionary programs too soon." Er, take note Mr. Langford.

"Show how to pay for it." Again, Mr. Langford.

"Begin with the parts of your vision people can most easily relate to," and "stay focused."

A mayor should identify two or three things that will be lasting accomplishments, pour energy into them and work hard not to fail. Otherwise, he or she will be remembered for failure.

And we've had enough of that.

Write to John Archibald atjarchibald@bhamnews.com.

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